

Several explanations have been offered as to why the number of gangs has increased and why gangs are beginning to emerge within smaller cities and rural areas. The most commonly offered explanation is that the big city gangs are sending their members into other small towns and rural areas in an effort to expand their drug trafficking enterprise. These areas offer the gang an opportunity to enhance their business and escape the intense law enforcement scrutiny, as well as competition with rival gangs, that they encounter in the big city. Skolnick (1990) offers some corroborating evidence for this theory and notes that the Los Angeles based Bloods and Crips have migrated to other cities in California and also seven other states outside of California. While this drug-franchising hypothesis appeals to the media the extent to which gangs seek to expand their drug network, or empires in this fashion is probably exaggerated; especially among youth gangs. Klein (1995) interviewed 228 police officers from across the nation and only 17, or 6 percent, acknowledged the existence of drug gangs migrating into their cities.

While migration for drug franchising purposes does occur it is not a fully sufficient explanation for explaining the increasing spread of youth gangs across the country. If migration does contribute to the growth and spread of youth gangs it is most likely the result of individual gang members leaving the bigger cities, because of familial relocation, to reside in smaller suburban and rural areas. The individual who may have been only a minor figure in the urban gang now seizes the opportunity to form and lead a new gang independent of his old big city gang.

Klein (1995) cogently argues that it is not necessary people migrating, but the migration of the gang culture itself that has contributed to the spread of youth gangs. The erroneous glamorization of gangs and gang life have been portrayed and disseminated through the mass media with the gang culture becoming increasingly commercialized. Consequently, teens and young adults emulate these behaviors and become “copycat” gangs with respect to the established big city gangs. Indeed, the Bloods and Crips which Skolnick found to be outside of Los Angeles may have been local youths who adopted the behaviors and dress patterns of the true Bloods and Crips.

Why do gangs arise?

Classic juvenile delinquency and gang researchers relied heavily on sociological explanations when explaining the etiological roots of gang formation. Shaw and McKay (1943) discovered higher rates of juvenile delinquency within areas which possessed significantly higher levels of social disorganization. Socially disorganized areas are characterized by: rapid population movements of low income, or working class, people;